Holy Fear
Mark 4:35 - 5:17
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Down through the ages fear and religion have been very closely related. Men have always responded to the unknown forces in the universe with fear, and more often than not attributed those forces to God or a number of gods. Cultural anthropologists tell us that this fear, this elemental dread of the unknown, is one of the basic building blocks of all religion. Because of this, it has long been assumed in scholarly circles that if fear could be abolished, if knowledge could eliminate all the unknowns, there would be little, if any, need for religion.

Thus religion, and professional religionists, have been allied with superstition, irrational fear and ignorance. In some circles religion is regarded as the enemy, and the final death of religion as the triumph of reason and rationality over irrational fear.

While that is pretty academic the fact is that many of the traditional fears of mankind have been eliminated. Ancient men - the kind of men who wrote and read the Psalter, for instance - were afraid of wild animals, drought, floods, unpredictable natural phenomena such as lightning, tornadoes and hurricanes, disease, plagues, and most of all unexplained human behavior which they attributed to evil spirits or demons. That list, however, does not prompt us to be afraid because we either understand the causal factors for all those phenomena, or we are well on our way to understanding. We have a healthy respect for tornadoes in Indiana, but I'd suggest that it is not the same kind of fear experienced by the ancient man who assumed that some terrible, mysterious force was intent on blowing him off the face of the earth.

Modern man, that is to say, is becoming secular. And that is a healthy step when it frees men from fear. It has had the predictable effect in our culture of lessening the impact of religion in general and of popular belief in God. An outside observer might observe that the handwriting is now on the

wall for institutional religion, and that within a generation or two we will simply no longer need the comfort and anesthesia against fear traditionally provided by religion.

Over against the idea that increased knowledge will eliminate fear and therefore the need for God, however, is a Biblical idea that the beginning of wisdom is something called "the fear of the Lord." That phrase is found in the 111th Psalm which we read responsively this morning. It is found also in the Book of Proverbs: "Lecture a wise man, and he will grow wiser; teach a righteous man and his learning will increase. The first step to wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." [Proverbs 9:9, 10] Now that reverses things. That suggests that God is not an irrational myth designed to allay fear, but fear of Him, knowledge of Him, is the pre-requisite to all wisdom.

But what did the ancient writers mean by "Fear of the Lord?" What might the phrase mean to us? It is not superstition before the unknown. It is not the fear that He will judge us like a celestial prosecuting attorney and send us to hell eternally. It is not the terror of final judgement, even though countless Sunday School lessons have attempted to interpret it that way. It is not fear of God because of what he might do to us at some future date.

What it is, is best illustrated in the New Testament story I read this morning. Jesus and the disciples, you will recall, were on the Sea of Galilea in a small fishing boat. That body of water is 600 feet below sea level; the mountains surrounding it act as a geologic funnel for the prevailing winds coming from the Mediterrean. Sudden, violent wind squalls are common. They come without warning: they leave as quickly as they come.

Jesus had fallen asleep: a storm descended suddenly and the disciples were afraid. They woke him; he spoke to the storm: it went away. He was critical of them for being afraid of the storm. And at that point the disciples should have been greatly relieved. They were not. They were "awestruck" Mark says. A literal rendering of the Greek would be "they feared with a great

fear." That is to say, they were afraid of the storm, but in the presence of a power with authority over nature they were really afraid, with a deeper, different kind of fear. I am far more impressed with the disciples' feeling than the question of how he managed to do it. I think their fear in this experience has something to teach us.

The same kind of thing happened immediately afterward with the demoniac. People were afraid of the man with his wild and mysterious behavior. But when the man was put right, when they saw him fully clothed, calm and rational they were really afraid; so afraid, in fact, that they begged Jesus to leave the area.

There are lots of references in both the Old and New Testaments to that kind of fear of the Lord - which might better be described as awe or reverence or respect - or simply "Holy Fear".

In the birth narratives the shepherds are afraid, and the angel's first word is "Fear not." Likewise, in the resurrection accounts, the women at the tomb are advised not to be afraid, which suggests that they were literally filled with fear.

Fear can be irrational, fear can be expressed in paranoia, fear can be paralyzing to a nation or an individual. Fear prohibited General George McLelland from attacking the armies of the Confederacy. Fear gripped this country in the 30's until the President rightly said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." Fear of Communism prompts this country to make certain decisions that history continues to prove were very questionable. Fear can paralyze you and me to the degree that we become its slave and live continually with its shackles holding us back. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a potent antidote to fear. We have nothing to fear. But the fear of the Lord is something different. It is that awareness of Another, a Totally Other, with whom we ultimately have to do, and to whom each one of us is accountable. And that, the Bible suggests, is the beginning of wisdom.

Where we are, 1971, in the midst of a knowledge and technology explosion, that awareness, that Fear of the Lord, is not very prominent. It might also be predicted that wisdom does not seem to be in abundant supply either.

In any case I think fear of the Lord is in disrepute for two basic reasons. First, I believe we are losing gradually the capacity for reverence. In his excellent little book "God our Contemporary" J. B. Phillips noted that, "... for vast numbers of people the capacity for awe, wonder and humility has been exhausted or numbed by the bewildering advance of modern knowledge. Human beings have sacrcely caught their breath after one achievement before they are confronted with yet another." [p. 34] That was written in 1960 - before things really started to happen. Modern man, when he looks into the night sky is no longer in reverence for the "moon and stars, the work of thy hands" as he is in anxiety about air pollution and curiosity about which of those twinkles represents a satellite.

Technology and modern achievement have also contributed to new life styles. Urban life today is totally different from anything humanity has experienced. The impersonality of the city allows individuals surrounded by millions of other individuals to feel lonely, to never know another person well. It allows us to sit in comfortable dens watching Walter Cronkites' weekly body count as if it were a major league box score. It allows us to live apart from any sense of the sanctity and dignity of individual human life. It allows us to hear the recital of the facts of My Lai, and somehow to rationalize the lives of those children as unfortunate but necessary casualties in the pursuit of our foreign policy. Where is reverence for life - in the cannonization of Lt. William Calley? Where is awe at the goodness and dignity of God's greatest gift in all of that? Well, I'm suggesting that it isn't there at all much any more: that through it all modern man is arrogantly puffed-up with his own importance: that life increasingly is lived apart from this thing called "the fear of the Lord"; and that the Psalmist was right - apart from that fear there is no

wisdom.

There is another reason for the decline of an awareness of the holy otherness of God - and of Holy Fear. This one is a little more difficult. It is our effort to restate the Gospel in words that are intelligible for modern man, the emphasis has been on his nearness, his involvement in life with us, immanence the theologians call it, as opposed to his omnipotence, his otherness, his apartness. We needed to be rid of the myth that God sits on a throne somewhere in the sky. We needed to begin to see him in terms of his activity within the common life of man. But in making that transition, God simply ceased to exist for many people. Or else he became so much a part of the human picture that there was no need for awe and reverence.

I've always been uncomfortable with the flippant, cozy, overly-familiar pop theology that talks about the "man upstairs". The God who comes through the pages of the Bible, and who was revealed in Jesus Christ is both with us and apart from us. He is both intimately involved in life and also totally apart from human life. He is a friend, a father - but he is also Lord and King of the Universe. I can worship him in confidence, but if he is God I must worship him on my knees in humility and awe and reverence and holy fear.

This all has some very important implications for our lives and for the future. We live in a secular society. And anyone who doesn't believe that needs only to stay at home some Sunday morning and observe what happens in your neighborhood. In mine the lawnmowers will be in concert, children will be laughing and playing, and the gentle aroma of charcoal will be wafting in the breeze. Well, out of this society that is "making it very well without God, thank you" are coming some profoundly important ethical questions.

The cover article in last week's Time magazine was entitled "The New Genetics: Man into Superman". And if you don't think we are already living in Huxley's "Brave New World", look that article up and read it. "1984" has already arrived.

Molecular biologists now have the knowledge and soon will have the technological methods to engage in something called genetic manipulation. They will, for instance, be able to eliminate inherited birth defects. They will also be able to guarantee the genetic transmission of certain traits, and whether what results is good or bad is a serious moral question. Laboratory scientists have proven the possibility of "cloning", i.e. self-reproduction. The nucleus of an unfertilized egg is replaced with a nucleus from another cell from the mother's body, at which point the ovum divides and begins to produce a carbon copy of the mother. It sounds like science fiction - but we are there. Test tube babies are a reality. A fertilized egg has been kept alive in a test tube for 59 days. In another experiment a 100 cell human embryo growing in a petri dish was put in a salt solution for microscopic observation: and for some people that constitutes murder. Time notes that only the development of an artificial womb with all the life support systems stands in the way of gestation outside the human body, and once the device is perfected the baby hatchery in Huxley's Brave New World will be a reality.

The deep concern of a growing number of people is that we may have more knowledge than we can handle. Not that the laboratories should be shut down, but that knowledge apart from some sense of personal responsibility - some accountability may bring more problems than it solves.

Nobel prize winner George Beadle warns that "man knows enough but is not yet wise enough to make man". [Time, April 19, 1971]

And the 19th century English poet Shelley observed: "We have more knowledge than we can reduce into practice: we have more scientific knowledge than can be accomodated. . . . Our calculations have outrun our conceptions: we have eaten more than we can digest."

Which is another way of saying that our brave new world needs nothing so much as a little "fear of the Lord", a little reverence and awe and a lot of humility. And that the 1984 right around the corner will need nothing so

much as individual people possessed with a little "holy fear".

Our personal faith begins, I believe, at a point near the fear of the Lord. I'm for cultiviating, intentionally, within our selves, within our church, within our families a little more awe and wonder, a little more reverence. I'm occasionally for laying aside our attempts to pin God down intellectually and to get down on our knees before him: before the One, who - in the words of Lesslie Newbigin, "created all things, who calls man into service and by whose word man is made truly man; but who is likewise the One whose voice is in the thunder, whose handiwork is spread out nightly in the heavens, whose chariot is in the storm . . " [Honest Religion for Secular Man, p. 61-62]

Our faith begins with Holy Fear, and grows as we acknowledge that the One who is holy and other and omnipotent has revealed his face in Jesus Christ, and has come among us to die on a cross. Our faith is true faith when we can hear and understand the words of that old spiritual, "Were you there when they curcified my Lord? Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

That's mature Christian Faith. That's the beginning of wisdom. That's "Holy Fear".

Amen.

Our father, forgive us the arrogance that seems to accompany our knowledge. Grant us the grace to be humble: to revere you: to stand in child-like wonder before you and before all men. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.